

MRS. NORTON.*

BY PARK BENJAMIN.

IN the last edition of Mrs. Norton's poems, the unrivalled burine of Lewis has attempted to trace the form and lineaments of the authoress—one of the most perfect specimens of female loveliness that ever furnished an idea to the painter or inspiration to the poet. Affliction, which has graven such deep lines into her heart, has not yet effaced the beauty of her countenance, or impaired the perfection of her form. We have, in the engraving before us, the full maturity of that gorgeous beauty, which, in its infancy, commanded the unqualified admiration of the most severe and fastidious critics, that ever sat in the Court of Fashion. We have still spared to us, that full and voluptuous bust—the arm that statuary's delight to chisel, and a neck that would have crazed Canova, while it rivals in whiteness, the purest Carrara of his studio. But it is the more minute and delicate lines of her beauty that have been swept by the touch of grief. Her countenance is sad and subdued; her full and flexible lip is no longer played upon by ever-varying smiles, and her eye, which once beamed with every expression, from the twinkle of arch simplicity to the flash of an insulted Jewess, has now settled into the melting, mournful, appealing gaze of heart-breaking sorrow.

When we consider that a form so peerless, is the dwelling place of a most brilliant and gifted spirit—that a countenance so winning and expressive is but the reflex of a pure and exalted soul,—that her eye is moistened by the swelling fountain beneath—that lips whose mute beauty is so persuasive, are the oracles of "thoughts that breathe and of words that burn," we can no longer discredit the miracles, which, in all ages, female loveliness has wrought, the devotion and the sacrifices it has wrung from the stern and selfish spirit of man. We are at no loss for the reason, why the Greeks of old raised altars to incarnate Beauty, why heroes bent their knees at her feet, and purchased trophies with their blood that they might suspend them in her temples.

If such endowments melt us into fealty, when, like the distant stars, they shine above our reach and our aspirations,—if such a being commands our respectful yet ardent love, when moving in a sphere

we never can approach, exacting homage from a thousand hearts, and raised as much above our sympathy as our position—what strength of affection, what full, free, unreserved devotion is enlisted in her service, when she is brought *near* to us by sorrow, when the sympathy of the humblest may be a balm to the wounded spirit of the highest, when innocence is assailed in *her* form, her character defamed, her honor maligned, her "life's life lied away!"

It must be known to most of our readers, that, incited by the political enemies of Lord Melbourne, the husband of Mrs. Norton commenced legal proceedings against that nobleman, alleging at the same time, the infidelity of his own wife. No means, which personal hatred or political bigotry could employ, were left untried, to sustain the accusation, and the fate of this unfortunate lady became involved with the triumph or the overthrow of Cabinets. All the arts, which were so successfully used to blacken the memory and hurry to an early grave the illustrious consort of George the Fourth, were revived against Mrs. Norton. Servants were bribed, spies were employed, key-holes searched, perjury encouraged, letters forged, surmises whispered about as facts, and doubts magnified into certainties, that the lady might be convicted and the minister crushed. The whole life, conduct, and conversation of the victim were subjected to the most searching scrutiny, her letters and private papers, her diary even—the communings of an imaginative woman with her own soul—were placed in the hands of dexterous and sophistical attorneys, that they might be tortured into proofs of guilt. Acts which the most rigid duenna would not have named—indiscretions, the out-gushings of a heart conscious of its own purity, the confiding conduct of innocence, and the licentiousness of her grandfather, were the strong proofs of adultery which counsel had the impudence to present to an English Jury. On the testimony of bribed witnesses, perjured coachmen and lubricious chambermaids, they sought to impeach the unsullied honor of a British matron; to fix stain on the pure lawn of a seraph by evidence which would not have sullied the flaunting robes of a Cyprian. Need it be said that the result of such an infamous attempt was the complete and triumphant vindication of the accused? But the acquittal of a Jury can be no reparation to a woman whose honor has been publicly assailed. Female virtue must not only be above reproach, but beyond suspicion, and the breath of calumny is frequently as fatal to it as the decrees of truth. The

* The Dream and other poems, by the Honorable Mrs. Norton—Dedicated to Her Grace, the Duchess of Sutherland.

"We have an human heart
All mortal thoughts confess a common home."

Shelley.

London. Henry Colburn, Publisher, Great Marlborough street, 1840.

verdict of "not guilty," is no bar to the malignity of scandal-loving human nature; there remain the cavil, the sneer, the "damning doubt," the insolent jest. She is separated by an impassable gulf from her only lawful protector; she can fly to no other without shame; she is placed in the most ambiguous position in society—that of an *unmarried* wife; fettered by all the restraints, watched with all the jealousy, but entitled to none of the privileges of the conjugal tie. And, in addition to all this, she becomes a bereaved mother; for the "righteous law entrusts the children to the exclusive guardianship of the father." Such is the position which a combination of most untoward circumstances has forced upon a lady who has every claim upon the protection, the respect, the admiration and the love of mankind.

We have dwelt thus long upon the domestic infelicity of Mrs. Norton, for the purpose of illustrating the influence which it has had in modifying her genius, and accounting for the undercurrent of deep melancholy which is discernible in many of her pieces, and for the outbreaks of passionate sympathy with the peculiar sorrows and sufferings of her own sex, which distinguish all of her more recent productions. Not alone, however, is Mrs. Norton in her misfortunes. She is but one of a large sisterhood, who, finding the waters poisoned that rill from "affection's springs," have sought to relieve their thirst from the "charmed cup" of Fame, who, in the deep and bitter fountains of unrequited love, in the gulfs of their own woe, have gathered pearls to deck the brow of female genius. The mournful song of Hemans, of Tighe and of Landon, had scarcely died away, before the lips of a fourth were touched with live coals from the same furnace of affliction. Indeed, domestic infelicity is so often connected with the developement of the poetical faculty in woman, is so frequently the cause which first awakens those deep and vivid emotions which are the essence of poetry, is so universally the concomitant and the burthen of female song, that the relation between the two is well worthy of philosophic investigation.

It seems to us that the effect is a very manifest result of the cause. The female mind is distinguished from that of the sterner sex, by its more delicate organization, by its keener sensibility, by its stronger and more sensitive affections; by its inferiority in mere strength of intellect, clearness of understanding, and range of observation. Her vision, therefore, though nicer, more accurate and susceptible, within its own range, takes in but a very small portion of that poetic realm which stretches from "heaven to earth, and from earth to heaven." She is consequently more entirely introversive than man, and draws whatever she communicates more from within than from without. She does not derive her inspiration, she does not form her genius, from a wide and accurate survey of human passions. The emotions which gave birth to such creations as Satan, Prometheus, Shylock, Manfred; the frightful visions which glare from the lurid page of Dante's *Inferno*; the wide range of incident, description and passion which distinguish the poetry of Scott and Southey—it would

be unnatural and unreasonable to expect from the delicate and peace-loving nature of woman. Her heart could never "bide the beatings" of such storms. She can, at the most, but love ardently, hope lastingly, and endure faithfully; and when she sings she can be but the oracle of her own heart. When her hopes are baffled, when her household gods are scattered, when despair takes up its abode within her breast these emotions become vocal, and she sings of yearning love, of deathless affections, of unshaken constancy, of patient endurance, of self-sacrificing devotion. As by the law of her nature, so by her position in society, the cultivation of her affections must be by far the most prominent object of her life, as well as her most reliable source for enjoyment.

In man's life love is but an episode; in woman's it is the entire action of the piece. With him it is but one act in the drama, with her it is the beginning, middle, and end. Man's warfare with the world is like the battle array of the Romans—they had their first, second, and third rank. If the first was defeated it fell back into the intervals of the second, and both together renewed the attack; if vanquished again they were received into the wider intervals of the third, and the whole mass united made a more impetuous onset. Thus with man, if unsuccessful in Love he rallies on Ambition; if again defeated, he falls back with accumulated energy upon Avarice—the peculiar passion of old age. Not so with woman; upon her success as a wife and a mother, her whole happiness is risked. In her encounter with the world she has no passion in reserve; she concentrates her whole force into one line and trusts herself and her fortune upon the success of a single charge. If unfortunate in this venture, she has no place for retreat except the recesses of her own heart. Can we wonder, then, that disappointment in what she values the most, the utter blight of her hopes, affections driven back upon her heart, and trust betrayed, should excite those strong and fervent emotions which will not "down" at mortal bidding, but express themselves in song? or, that the wing of her spirit while brooding over the ruin of her peace, should gather strength for poetic flight?

We do not know where we could have found a more complete illustration of these views than in the history of Mrs. Norton. The blow which blighted the fair promise of her spring, found her a poetess of some celebrity. She had given to the world many pieces, imbued with the warm sensibility, the pure, ardent, and devoted love of woman; but nothing which in sincerity, strength, fervor and truthfulness of passion, can compare with the "Dream"—gushing as it does from the heart of the betrayed wife and abandoned mother. We had intended to speak at some length of the characteristics of Mrs. Norton's genius, but we believe that the same end will be accomplished more to the edification of our readers, by giving a short analysis of this beautiful poem.

The story of the piece, is brief and simple, and was undoubtedly suggested to her mind by the association of contrast. We are presented with a widowed mother watching

“her slumbering child,
On whose young face the sixteenth summer smiled.”

And we have the following exquisite family piece presented—“*O matre pulchrâ filia pulchrior.*”

“So like they seem'd in form and lineament,
You might have deem'd her face its shadow gave
To the clear mirror of a fountain's wave;
Only in this they differ'd; that, while one
Was warm and radiant as the summer sun,
The other's smile had more a moonlight play,
For many tears had wept its glow away;
Yet was she fair; of loveliness so true,
That time which faded, never could subdue;
And though the sleeper, like a half blown rose,
Show'd bright as angels in her soft repose,
Though bluer veins ran through each snowy lid,
Curtaining sweet eyes by long dark lashes hid—
Eyes that as yet had never learnt to weep,
But woke up smiling like a child from sleep;—
Though fainter lines were pencill'd on the brow,
Which cast soft shadow on the orbs below;
Though deeper color flush'd her youthful cheek,
In its smooth curve more joyous and less meek,
And fuller seem'd the small and crimson mouth,
With teeth like those that glitter in the south,—
She had but youth's superior brightness, such
As the skill'd painter gives with flattering touch,
When he would picture every lingering grace,
Which once shone brighter in some copied face;
And it was compliment when'er she smiled
To say, “Thou'rt like thy mother, my fair child.”

Over such a child the mother hangs with devoted fondness, with sweet recollections of her infancy, and

“of the echange of time and tide
Since Heaven first sent the blessing by her side,”

and with mournful anticipations, of what would befall the fledged bird, when it should grow impatient of the nest. The child at length awakes—

“And when her shadowy gaze
Had lost the dazzled look of wild amaze,

she relates her dream to the mother.

“Methought, oh! gentle mother, by thy side
I dwelt no more as now, but through a wide
And sweet world wander'd, nor even then alone;
For ever in that dream's soft light stood one,—
I know not who,—yet most familiar seem'd
The fond companionship of which I dream'd!
A Brother's love is but a name to me;
A Father's brighten'd not my infancy,
To me in childhood's years no stranger's face
Took from long habit friendship's holy grace;
My life hath still been lone, and needed not,
Heaven knows, more perfect love than was my lot
In thy dear heart; how dream'd I then, sweet Mother,
Of any love but thine, who knew no other?”

Dear little innocence! you have much to learn. Thy “shadow and herself” wander together by the “blue and boundless sea,” the shore is covered with flowers and “tangled underwood” and “sunny fern.” The ocean, “the floating nautilus,” the “pink-lipped” shells—

“And many color'd weeds
And long bulbous things like jasper beads,”

and ships with “swelling sails unfurled,” dance before her in this delightful vision until—

“The deep spirit of the wind awoke,
Ruffling in wrath each glassy verdant mound,
While onward roll'd the army of huge waves,
Until the foremost with exulting roar,
Rose proudly crested o'er his brother slaves,
And dashed triumphant to the groaning shore.”

The ocean finally passes from her sleeping vision and the winged travellers fly into a different scene—

“We look on England's woodland fresh and green,”

and a beautiful picture is presented of the rural scenery of Great Britain, until the scene changes again to some romantic resting place of the dead, to some *Père la Chaise*, or Laurel Hill, or Mount Auburn, to a—

“heath
Where yew and cypress seemed to wave
O'er countless tombs, so beautiful, that death
Seemed here to make a garden of the grave.”

And as the fair one wanders over the “mighty dead,” over “warriors,” and “sons of song” and orators—

“whose all persuading tongue
Had moved the nations with resistless sway,”

and “pale sons of science”—

“He who wandered with me in my dream
Told me their histories as we onward went,
Till the grave shone with such a hallowed beam,
Such pleasure with their memory seem'd blent
That, when we looked to heaven, our upward eyes
With no funereal sadness mock'd the skies.”

We are ourselves getting rapidly to envy that “fellow” who is “wandering with her.” In our opinion she will soon be able to answer her own *naïve* question about love. Her companion leads her, with admirable discernment, as we think, into a glorious “old library.” What better place could he have selected to impress the heart of an imaginative and appreciating “little love.” If the cemetery and those “histories” did not explain to her the novel psychological emotion about which she consulted her mother, what occurs in the library certainly will. For see how the youth plays with the susceptibilities of a girl of “sixteen”—

“We sate together: *his most noble head*
Bent o'er the storied tome of other days,
And still he commented on all we read,
And taught me what to love and what to praise.
Then Spencer made the summer day seem brief,
Or Milton sounded with a loftier song,
Then Cowper charmed, with lays of gentle grief,
Or rough old Dryden roll'd the hour along.
Or, in his varied beauty dearer still,
Sweet Shakspeare changed the world around, at will;
And we forgot the sunshine of that room
To sit with Jacques in the forest gloom;
To look abroad with Juliet's anxious eye
For her gay lover 'neath the moonlight sky;
Stand with Macbeth upon the haunted heath,
Or weep for gentle Desdemona's death;
Watch on bright Cydnus' wave, the glittering sheen,
And silken sails of Egypt's wanton Queen;
Or roam with Ariel through that island strange,
Where spirits and not men were wont to range,
Still struggling on through brake and bush and hollow,
Hearing the sweet voice calling “Follow! follow!”

Nor were there wanting lays of other lands,
For these were all familiar in his hands:
And Dante's dream of horror work'd its spell,—
And Petrarch's sadness on our bosoms fell,—
And prison'd Tasso's—he, the coldly loved,
The madly-loving! he, so deeply proved
By many a year of darkness, like the grave,
For her who dared not plead, or would not save,
For her who thought the poet's suit brought shame,
Whose passion hath immortalized her name!
And Egmont, with his noble heart betrayed,—

And Carlo's haunted by a murder'd shade,—
 And Faust's strange legend, sweet and wondrous wild,
 Stole many a tear:—Creation's loveliest child!
 Guileless, ensnared, and tempted Margaret,
 'Who could peruse thy fate with eyes unwet?'"

If such a quantity of poetry and such poetry—
 Spencer, Milton, Dryden, Cowper, Shakspeare,
 Dante, Tasso and Gœthe did not enlighten the
 "young innocent," respecting the emotions with
 which she regarded the "fond companion of her
 dreams," we do not know to whom to commend her
 for instruction. But we must hurry on with the
 story; the pair wander over Italy, and a picture is
 presented, of mountain and vale, of orange and myr-
 tle groves, of grottoes, fountains, palaces, paintings,
 and statues that would "create a soul" under the
 ribs of a utilitarian. We were inclined to think that
 he of "the most noble brow," entrapped the young
 affections of the dreamer in the "old library," but
 we do not believe that she breathed the delicious
 confession into his ear until they reached the sunny
 clime of Italy. It was the unrivalled music of that
 land which unsealed her lips.

"We sate and listened to some measure soft
 From many instruments; or faint and lone
 (Touch'd by his gentle hand or by my own)
 The little lute its chorled notes would send,
 Tender and clear; and with our voices blend
 Cadence so true, that when the breeze swept by
One mingled echo floated on its sigh!
 And still as day by day we saw depart,
 I was the living idol of his heart:
 How to make joy a portion of the air
 That breathed around me seemed his only care.
 For me the harp was strung, the page was turned;
 For me the morning rose, the sunset burn'd;
 For me the Spring put on her verdant suit;
 For me the Summer flowers, the Autumn fruit;
 The very world seemed mine, so *mighty strove*
For my contentment that enduring love."

But the slumbers of the dear girl are at length broken,
 she discovers that it is *but a dream*, and thus repines
 over the contrast.

"Is all that radiance past—gone by for ever—
 And must there in its stead for ever be
 The gray, sad sky, the cold and clouded river,
 And dismal dwelling by the wintry sea?
 Ere half a summer altering day by day,
 In fickle brightness, here, hath passed away!
 And was that form (whose love might well sustain)
 Naught but a vapor of the dreaming brain?
 Would I had slept forever."

The "mournful mother" now speaks. And how
 sweetly come from her lips the lessons of piety and
 resignation. She gently rebukes her daughter, con-
 trasts the world which fancy paints with the stern
 realities of existence, and distils into the opening
 mind of the child the wisdom which her own sad ex-
 perience had taught.

"Upbraid not Heaven, whose wisdom thus would rule
 A world whose changes are the soul's best school:
 All dream like thee and 't is for mercy's sake
 That those who dream the wildest soonest wake;
 All deem Perfection's system would be found
 In giving earthly sense no stint or bound;
 All look for happiness beneath the sun,
 And each expects what God hath given to none."

It is in this part of the argument that we discover the
 fervor, strength, and pathos that the lessons of ex-

perience impart. It is here that Mrs. Norton teaches
 in song what she has herself learnt in suffering. If
 the following is not poetry it is something that
 moistens the eye very much like it.

"Nor ev'n does love whose fresh and radiant beam
 Gave added brightness to thy wandering dream,
 Preserve from bitter touch of ills unknown,
 But rather brings strange sorrows of its own.
 Various the ways in which our souls are tried;
 Love often fails where most our faith relied.
 Some wayward heart may win, without a thought,
 That which thine own by sacrifice had bought;
 May carelessly aside the treasure cast
 And yet be madly worshipped to the last;
 Whilst thou forsaken, grieving, left to pine,
 Vainly may'st claim his plighted faith as thine;
 Vainly his idol's charms with thine compare,
 And know thyself as young, as bright, as fair.
 Vainly in jealous pangs consume thy day,
 And waste the sleepless night in tears away;
 Vainly with forced indulgence strive to smile,
 In the cold world heart-broken all the while;
 Or from its glittering and unquiet crowd,
 Thy brain on fire, thy spirit crushed and bow'd,
 Creep home unnoticed, there to weep alone,
 Mock'd by a claim which gives thee not thy own;
 Which leaves thee bound through all thy blighted youth
 To him, whose perjured heart hath broke its truth;
 While the just world beholding thee bereft,
 Scorns—not his sin—but *thee*, for being left!"

* * * * *

"Those whom man, not God, hath parted know,
 A heavier pang, a more enduring woe;
 No softening memory mingles with *their* tears,
 Still the wound rankles on through dreary years,
 Still the heart feels, in bitterest hours of blame
 It dares not curse the long familiar name;
 Still, vainly free, through many a cheerless day,
 From weaker ties turns helplessly away,
 Sick for the smile that bless'd its home of yore,
 The natural joys of life that come no more;
 And, all bewildered by the abyss, whose gloom
 Dark and impassable as is the tomb,
 Lies stretch'd between the future and the past,—
 Sinks into deep and cold despair at last.
 Heaven give thee poverty, disease or death,
 Each varied ill that waits on human breath,
 Rather than bid thee linger out thy life
 In the long toil of such unnatural strife.
 To wander through the world unreconciled,
 Heart-weary as a spirit-broken child,
 And think it were an hour of bliss like Heaven
 If thou could'st die—forgiving and forgiven,—
 Or with a feverish hope, of anguish born,
 (Nerving thy mind to feel indignant scorn
 Of all thy cruel foes who 'twixt thee stand,
 Holding thy heart-strings with a reckless hand,)
 Steal to his presence now unseen so long,
 And claim *his* mercy who hath dealt the wrong!
 Within the aching depths of thy poor heart
 Dive, as it were, even to the roots of pain
 And wrench up thoughts that tear thy soul apart,
 And burn like fire through thy bewildered brain.
 Clothe them in passionate words of wild appeal
 To teach thy fellow creatures *how* to feel,—
 Pray, weep, exhaust thyself in maddening tears,—
 Recall the hopes, the influences of years,—
 Kneel, dash thyself upon the senseless ground,
 Writhe as the worm writhes with dividing wound,
 Invoke the heaven that knows thy sorrow's truth,
 By all the softening memories of youth—
 By every hope that cheered thine earlier day—
 By every tear that washes wrath away—
 By every old remembrance long gone by—
 By every pang that makes thee yearn to die;
 And learn at length how deep and stern a blow
 Near hands can strike, and yet no pity show!
 Oh! weak to suffer, savage to inflict,
 Is man's commingling nature; hear him now
 Some transient trial of his life depict,
 Hear him in holy rites a suppliant bow;
 See him shrink back from sickness and from pain;
 And in his sorrow to his God complain—
 'Remit my trespass, spare my sin,' he cries,
 'All-merciful, All-mighty, and All-wise:
 Quench this affliction's bitter whelming tide,
 Draw out thy barbed arrow from my side:—'

And rises from that mockery of prayer
To hate some brother-debtor in despair."

From what deep fountains of suffering must these lines have been drawn! What days, weeks, months of deferred hope, of doubt, and of final despair are recorded here!

What life-drops from the minstrel wrung
Have gushed with every word?

The mother at length ceases, and the spirited girl shrinking from the picture of life which has been presented to her, thus replies:—

"If this be so, then mother, let me die
Ere yet the glow hath faded from my sky!
Let me die young; before the holy trust,
In human kindness crumbles into dust;
Before I suffer what I have not earned
Or see by treachery my truth returned;
Before the love I live for fades away;
Before the hopes I cherish'd most decay;
Before the withering touch of fearful change
Makes some familiar face look cold and strange,
Or some dear heart close knitted to my own,
By perishing, hath left me more alone!
Though death be bitter, I can brave its pain
Better than all which threats if I remain,
While my soul, freed from ev'ry chance of ill,
Soars to that God whose high mysterious will,
Sent me, foredoom'd to grief, with wandering feet
To grope my way through all this fair deceit."

The mother then breaks forth in a beautiful strain,

inculcating confidence in God and submission to his will. We have never heard a homily from any pulpit that has taught these lessons with one half the force and eloquence of these beautiful lines. If any of our readers, in the midst of sorrow, suffering or despair, are inclined to forget that there is "another and a better world," we advise them to learn patience under tribulation from the lips of Mrs. Norton. We wish we could quote them—but we cannot—we have already transcended our limits and can only give the beautiful and touching end of this "sad and eventful history.

"There was a pause; then with a tremulous smile,
The maiden turned and pressed her mother's hand:
'Shall I not bear what thou hast borne erewhile?
Shall I, rebellious, Heaven's high will withstand?
No! cheerly on, my wandering path I'll take;
Nor fear the destiny I did not make:
Though earthly joy grow dim—though pleasure waneth—
This thou hath taught thy child, that God remaineth!'"

"And from her mother's fond protecting side
She went into the world, a youthful bride."

Fain would we linger longer among the brilliant creations of Mrs. Norton's genius; but, like her own beautiful sleepers, our "dream" is broken, and we must return from fairy-land to encounter "the rude world."